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ABSTRACT

Approximately 360,000 people in Florida are migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Although this group includes a wide array of ethnicities with their own cultural characteristics, the shared experience of migrancy lends some common threads to an otherwise diverse population. This publication explores these commonalities, as they relate to educators' work with migrant parents and families. Federal guidelines for migrant program eligibility are briefly summarized. Because their income and survival are closely tied to the weather and other conditions beyond their control, migrant families live a very transient lifestyle. During peak earning times, all family members, even young children, may perform agricultural work. Families tend to be large, and extended-family members often live with or near each other, sharing important roles in sustaining the family. The family is usually patriarchal, at least to outward appearances, and the father's input must be sought for academic and social decisions affecting the family. Education is highly valued by many migrant families, but the nature of migrant work often interferes with regular school attendance. Student absenteeism may also be related to chronic health problems or the need to fulfill family obligations. Having little education themselves, many migrant parents may be unaware of school policies and procedures and may hesitate to become involved in school-related matters. Twenty-six specific recommendations are offered to educators working with migrant parents. (SV)

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The Culture of Migrancy

by Bridget McGilvra, ESCORT

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When exploring diverse cultures in Florida, it is judicious to expand the traditional considerations of culture dealing with racial or ethnic backgrounds to include a group that represents approximately 360,000 people statewide: migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Although this group embraces a diverse mix of racial and ethnic groups, it maintains its own distinctive culture. The better professional parent educators understand some of the nuances of this particular culture, the more able they will be to provide appropriate services in a culturally sensitive manner.

The culture of migrancy is inextricably tied to mobility. The federal definition of a migrant farmworker is a person who moves across school district lines in search of agricultural work. This includes inter- and intrastate migrant farmworkers.

Seasonal farmworkers are those who work in agricultural jobs during the season, and when that work ends, find nonagricultural employment in the same geographical area rather than migrating to find work.

Thus, the culture of migrancy is not determined by race or ethnicity, but more by similarities in employment patterns and lifestyle. A wide array of ethnicities make up the face of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Florida: African American, Caucasian, Central American, Haitian, Mexican, Mexican American, and Vietnamese, to name a few. While each of these groups enjoy their own cultural norms and characteristics, the shared experience of migrancy does lend some common threads to an otherwise diverse population. This article will explore these commonalties, as they are related to working with parents and families. However, due to the fact that an overwhelming majority of migrant farmworkers in Florida are of Mexican decent, some of the cultural norms of this ethnic group will be included in our discussion.

A Look at the Work

A myriad of activities qualify as agricultural work under the federal guidelines.

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These include harvesting fruits and vegetables, grading and packing produce, pruning ornamental plants, fishing, and working in poultry and meat packing plants, to name a few. To be considered a migrant farmworker, a person must have crossed school district lines in search of agricultural work within the previous 36 months. In order for a child to be eligible for services under the federally funded Title I Migrant Program, the child must have moved with, or joined, his or her parent or guardians, while they sought agricultural work. Young people under the age of 22 who no longer live with their parents, but continue to migrate on their own, are categorized as "emancipated youth". They may also be eligible for services if they have not graduated from high school.

Migrant farmwork is subject to the conditions and elements affecting the produce. A drought or a flood may ruin crops; a bad bout of Red Tide may result in the loss of fishing work; an insect infestation may close greenhouses. When conditions mandate, all other concerns become secondary to "bringing in the crop", even school, health problems, or appointments. The survival of the family depends on agricultural work, and there may only be a small window of opportunity to capitalize on this work.

Because their income is tied so relentlessly to elements and other conditions beyond their control, migrant farmworkers often encounter a lifestyle full of disruption.

They may find work for only a few weeks in one location, move to the next and find no work, and move on again, only to be faced with finding no housing. They live a transient lifestyle, packing everything they own into the family truck or van and moving on to the next destination, often with only a few hours notice. All aspects of life are affected by this continual uprooting.

Because their income is tied so relentlessly to elements and other conditions beyond their control, migrant farmworkers often encounter a lifestyle full of disruption.

During periods of plentiful work, all able family members lend a hand, including children as young as 6 and 7 years old. Agricultural work continues to pay low wages, necessitating the assistance of all family members during peak earning times. The median earning for farmworker households in 1997 was between $7,500 and $10,000, with more than three-fifths of farmworker households living in poverty. The wages earned must then sustain the family throughout their travels in search of work, and through periods of unemployment. Individual needs are considered secondary to those of the survival of the family unit.

A Look at the Family

As is common in many agrarian cultures, migrant families tend to be large, many having more than five children.

There are numerous reasons for this: religious beliefs, the need for people to work, lack of family planning, and the great value placed on children. To a large extent, families are found to be intact, with both parents present in the home.

Furthermore, members of the extended family often live with or near each other, and often share in disciplining and raising the children. Because all members play important roles in sustaining the family, older children often continue to live and work with their families until they are married, rather than moving out and establishing their independence. Children who do marry often begin their married and childbearing years living in their parents' home.

The family is essentially patriarchal, at least to outward appearances. The roles of males and females are clearly defined, with males being seen as the breadwinners, decision makers, and disciplinarians. Although migrant females often labor next to the males and contribute financially to the family, their roles are more often defined by homemaking and child-rearing. Migrant mothers are greatly revered by their families, no doubt because they labor long hours alongside their husbands, and then return home to cook, clean, and tend to the children and to the overall needs of the family.

Contributing to the welfare of the family is a source of pride and accomplishment for even the youngest children in a migrant family.

While the father may seem to be somewhat removed from daily child-rearing activities, his input must be sought regarding academic and social decisions affecting the entire family. Initial concerns or difficulties may be discussed with the mother, but the father's approval must be secured before any significant decisions can be made. Children are taught to respect and obey adults, both within and outside of the family, and discipline, sometimes physical in nature, is strictly adhered to. Children are generally closely supervised and denied some of the freedoms other children enjoy. Siblings are often sent along on outings to chaperone other family members.

The survival of the family is a paramount concern for all family members. Each person has a meaningful role, from contributing financially, to helping around the house, babysitting, and translating. Personal needs and desires are considered secondary to those affecting the family as a whole. Contributing to the welfare of the family is a source of pride and accomplishment for even the youngest children in a migrant family.

A Look at Education

Education is highly valued by many migrant families. It is seen as a ticket to the future, providing the possibility of a career that is not subject to the whims of the weather.

Although many migrant parents may not have had the option of attending much traditional schooling themselves, they firmly believe in the importance of education and are convinced that education will offer their children opportunities that they did not have.

> Education is highly valued by many migrant families.

However, believing in the value of education, and actually providing ongoing support for the pursuit of education may result in two different realities within the migrant home. Because the nature of migrant work presents the challenges of mobility and limited peak earning times, daily attendance at school may sometimes become a "luxury." When survival necessitates that all who wish to eat must work, or when work comes to an end and stakes must be pulled up yet again, education may become secondary to survival.

Due to poor nutrition, ventilation, and lack of access to affordable medical resources, many of these children suffer with chronic health problems. They often miss school, or come to school too sick or too tired to learn. As responsible members of the family, children are often called upon to fulfill adult roles such as babysitting, translating, or transporting a parent to an appointment. These responsibilities would be considered necessities and viewed as just as important as attending school.

Having had little formal education themselves, or little experience with educational institutions, many migrant parents may not be aware of policies and procedures that may affect their children's enrollment, withdrawal, promotion, or retention.

Parents may not fully comprehend the significance of decisions and actions that weigh heavily on a child's potential success in school, such as starting school on the first day, daily attendance, following proper withdrawal procedures, or having parents attend conferences. What may seem like a lack of support for a child's education, may, in fact, reflect more a lack of information or understanding. In addition, parents who have little schooling, or who may have had negative experiences with educational institutions may be hesitant to become involved. In general, educators are revered, and migrant parents may fear that their attempts to be involved in their children's academic/school affairs will be perceived as meddling in the teacher's realm. Another unfortunate reality is that many parents are uneducated or illiterate, resulting in low self-esteem when it comes to academic matters.

> What may seem like a lack of support for a child's education , may, in fact, reflect more a lack of information or understanding.

A clear understanding of the rights and responsibilities of students and parents, along with the requirements and benefits of the educational system, is imperative if migrant families are to have equal access to education in this country. The workings of the pupil progression plan, special educational programs, extracurricular activities, and post-secondary options must become a working part of migrant families' knowledge of the school system. Parents must be made to feel that they are valuable partners in their children's education, the school system, and their community as a whole.

Recommendations for Parent Educators

- Establish contact with migrant families quickly, as they may only be in the area a short time.

- Make personal contact, a home visit if possible, since many migrant families do not have telephones and are more receptive to face-to-face communication.

- Plan home visits when both parents are available, and be prepared to stay a while and to accept offers of food or drink.

- Establish yourself as a valuable resource person be providing families with information about your program, as well as other services and programs available in the community.

- Be prepared to do an informal needs assessment and make appropriate referrals.

- Offer to assist families in making initial contacts with schools and agencies, or in accessing needed resources, if they are new to the area.

- Help families build community support networks so that their children are able to attend school, rather than miss valuable class time in order to assist with family needs and business matters.

- When sending information home in writing, translate the information into the family's home language, but be aware that some parents are illiterate in their native language.

- Encourage parents to contact you with questions or needs, as they are generally proud people and would not want to be a burden.

- Be aware that many migrant parents consider their job to be feeding, clothing, and housing their children, and believe that the role of educating children lies with the schools.

- Enlist parents as partners in education, emphasizing their important roles as support systems, teachers, and role models.

- Understand that migrant parents may be uncomfortable in a school setting or trying to help their children, and that they consider educators to be the experts.

- Establish a personal relationship with migrant parents through home visits prior to inviting them to organized school functions.

Recommendations for Parent Educators (cont.)

- When planning home visits, parent meetings, or other activities, consider scheduling the activities during evenings or times of the year when migrant workers are not working late.

- When planning parent meetings or activities, extend invitations to older members of the immediate or extended family living in the home, as well as to the parents, and plan to offer transportation and babysitting, and to have meeting activities translated.

- Stress the importance of educational continuity, and provide families with information regarding the local school district's calendar, policies, and regulations.

- Provide parents with specific information about their child's progress in school, and suggest ways parents or other family members can assist the child.

- Offer practical suggestions regarding alternatives to physical discipline, appropriate bedtimes, study times, and the use of television.

- Be sensitive to the fact that difficulties with educational or disciplinary issues may be cause for great emotional displays within the family.

- Instill in migrant parents that they do have the right to challenge and/or question the educational system, and that their children will achieve more by having informed, involved parents.

- Recognize that some homes do not have access to educational resources. Provide the family with such resources and instructions for their use, when possible, in addition to introducing the family to free local resources such as the public library.

- Assist families with seeking resources through using the Internet and available agencies.

- Promote family literacy to making families aware of available literacy programs or providing family literacy activities in the home.

- Educate parents about appropriate child developmental stages, and assist them with identifying concerns in this area.

- Recognize that some parents see physical or mental handicaps as acts of fate and may be reluctant to seek assistance for these conditions.

- Offer help discreetly to the family of a child who is poorly clothed or has personal hygiene problems. Many migrant homes do not have proper facilities, and many children ready themselves for school in the morning.

For Additional Information

Call the Region XIV
Comprehensive Center at ETS

1-800-756-9003

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